

# **Community Assistantship Program**

## **Minnesota Rural Futures Survey Results**

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# **Minnesota Rural Futures Survey Results**

Prepared in partnership with  
Minnesota Rural Futures (MRF)

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## **CURA RESOURCE COLLECTION**

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Over the past 15 years Minnesota Rural Futures has been recognizing rural women and women in agriculture for having a leadership role and significant contribution to agriculture. With the exception of 1993 and 1996, approximately six women have been recognized on a yearly basis since 1992. Thus far, 64 women have been recognized.

Minnesota Rural Futures is undergoing a project that will ultimately provide a database of rural women leaders' contact and brief demographic information, experience and involvement in farming/ agriculture/ rural Minnesota, and leadership skills. The database will be used to help increase involvement, strengthen communication, and notify women of leadership opportunities in rural Minnesota.

An online survey was used to collect and analyzes characteristics of these rural women leaders.

#### Method

The initial stage of the project required contacting past women leaders. MRF files were used to identify any contact information of the women. Email addresses, mailing addresses, and phone numbers were recorded. Those women without any of this information on file had to be researched further. Resume committees, jobs, and organizations provided some leads. Online white pages were used to locate the remainder of the winners.

Of the past winners, seven could not be located and one was deceased. Twenty seven of the women that had email addresses responded and agreed to complete the survey. Two requested mailed surveys. The remaining MRF winners were contacted by mail or email, but could not be reached / did not respond within the given time frame. A large non-response rate was most likely due to the lack of past winners having email

addresses. A hard copy of the survey was not offered, unless specifically requested by the MRF winner.

After two weeks, 19 women responded to the survey. The results were compiled online using a Zoomerang web survey. More responses are still on their way either via internet response or by mail. The collected data was analyzed by using Excel.

### Results and Discussion

#### *Contact Information:*

The first portion of the survey was simply contact information: requests for names, emails, phone numbers, and addresses.

#### *Demographics:*

Second, women who participated in the study were asked for demographical information. All had siblings (42% had more than 4). Seventy nine percent are married. Ninety percent were mothers (16% have one child, 32% have two, 26% have three, and 16% have four or more), sixteen percent were still caring for a child under 18. Additionally, eleven percent care for an elderly parent. Thirty seven percent are grandmothers.

In terms of their farming experience, as a child, 63% of respondents' families owned or ran a farm as an adult, 63% of their families own or run a farm. Twenty-one percent of the rural women leaders do not have farming experience. Of those that became involved in farming as an adult, most of them work and or manage a spouse's family farm.

#### *Agricultural and Rural Experience:*

When asked what got them involved in rural or agricultural organizations and activities, 79% said their strong interest in rural issues, 68% grew up in rural areas, 63% work with Extension or other educational programs, 32% moved to rural areas and became involved, and 26% began working in agricultural related business.

Ninety-five percent of respondents have served on a committee, board, or commission. Fifteen of the positions were elected, 14 volunteer, 13 appointed, and 12 nominated.

#### Leadership:

The past MRF winners also completed a leadership portion of the questionnaire. They were asked to rate on a scale of one to five how much they agree or disagree with statements listed. One was strongly disagree and five was strongly agree. "I agree to lead when asked," received the highest rating of those questions analyzed. Respondents reported an average of 4.25. They were also in agreement (mean 4.05) with the statements, "I like to join organizations that have a strong reputation and membership" and "I seek out involvement opportunities" (mean 4.0). Rural women leaders seem to approach leadership in a well-rounded fashion. They accept the roles they are asked to fill, join already existing organizations, and continue to take the initiative to find new opportunities for involvement.

A second factor analyzed in the leadership portion, was the consistency (or lack thereof) in rural women's views of their leadership characteristics. Again the question, "I agree to lead when asked" had an agreeable rating average of 4.25, and a small standard deviation of .30. Question 13, "I would rather work with women on projects" produced a rather neutral response of 2.95, with a small standard deviation of .50. These small

standard deviations suggest that there is relatively consistent agreement on ratings for these questions. When asked to lead, rural women leaders usually accept and they do not show a preference for gender in term of collaboration. Questions 4, I like to originate new organizations, and 14, "I do not think gender is a factor when it comes to team interactions" both had relatively large standard deviations, of 1.46 and 1.31 respectively. The former indicates that some rural women "leaders" like to take charge and initiate new groups, whereas others are on the other extreme and would much rather just join existing groups. The latter suggests that there is a divide between women leaders who think that gender differences exist in group settings; while only one person remained neutral on the topic, 9 disagreed and 8 agreed.

Extensive correlations were conducted using Excel for all combinations of questions 1-6. They ranged from  $r = 0$  to  $r = .65$ . Those with correlations coefficients above .5 were one and two (.65), two and six (.56), and four and six (.56). The more a woman agrees that she is someone who seeks out involvement opportunities, the more likely she will agree that she tends to lead when asked. There is also a correlation between aspiring to obtain power and agreeing to lead when asked. One explanation is that women that accept leadership positions look upon it as an opportunity to (positively) influence others (i.e. increase their power). Last, those women that like to start new groups will most likely be in a position of power (if not the highest position of power). This may be one of many motivating factors for someone to begin an organization.

The section on involvement and farming responsibilities will be used for the database. An Excel file designates each woman's involvement in each area as 1=no, 2=somewhat, and 3=yes (as listed in her self-report survey). That database will be used

by organizations seeking rural women leaders, as well as those that have openings on boards, staffs, office positions. The women will be matched by their qualifications, experiences, and interests to the leadership opportunities available. MRF plans to make the Excel spreadsheet into a comprehensive ACCESS search in the near future to further enhance the resource list's availability and usability.

#### Farming Responsibilities:

The section regarding experience growing or raising various animals and crops is part of the database (Excel file).

The section on farming responsibilities explores how the work is divided between Minnesota women leaders and their partners in terms of 1) Farm labor/Agricultural Production, 2) Running Farm Errands, 3) Housework, 4) Childcare, 5) Bookkeeping Information and Finance, and 6) Work Outside the Home / Farm. All of the tasks are mostly shared by both. When the labor is divided, partners tend to have more responsibilities in the areas of Farm Labor/ Agricultural Production (6% women v. 25% partners); whereas women dominate the responsibility in Housework (44% v. 0%), childcare (19% v. 0%), bookkeeping information and finance (38% v. 19%), and work outside the home / farm (31% v. 6%). While farm labor, housework, and childcare seem to be consistent with traditional roles and statistics, it is positive to see that women leaders may be even more involved with the financial management of farming than their spouses.

#### *Innovations and Firsts:*

In this section, it is clear why these women were selected as MRF winners. Over 90 percent have been a founder/ co-founder of an organization or club and nearly three



fourths of the women are or have been the only women on a board, committee, or commission. About half of the women have been the first woman to serve on a board, committee, commission, or in a specific position.

All of the women who are in leadership positions encourage other females to join leadership activities. Getting women leaders in the pipeline is one of the biggest challenges that rural women face. The MRF database will hopefully increase the communication between women leaders as well as encourage up and coming rural females to take on leadership positions.

Childhood rearing and role models may also have played a factor in rural women leaders' lives. Sixty-three percent say they were encouraged to take on leadership roles as a child, 56% were expected to perform the same duties as their brothers, and 50% had both parents working on the farm.

Since winning the MRF award, 89 % are still involved in agriculture, 88% are still in the same area of it. Eighty four percent are still living in a rural area.

Their agricultural experience helped them in other areas of their lives. A majority of the women reported improved communication skills, increased independence, improved leadership, gained confidence, and gained financial management skills.

While the experiences of rural women have been beneficial, it does not mean that their path is necessarily easier than in the past. Although gender boundaries are being crossed and women are taking on a greater role in rural areas, farming overall is getting harder. When compared to 15 years ago, farming in general is more difficult (71%). This observation was consistent across all categories- financial benefits, community support, as a full time job, and as a way of life- were all reported as more difficult than in the past.

It is crucial that rural leaders step up to get through this difficult time and to improve the future of farming. Their lives and prosperity, as well as the economy, nutrition, and health of Minnesotans and people across the world depend on them.

Respondents listed their volunteer activities and positions, elected positions (government, agricultural organizations, church, community groups, state), and work experience. This information will be used for and accessible through the database.

#### Profile Information for Database

All volunteer activities and positions, elected positions, and work experience (and any resumes) have been compiled in a separate file that will be later entered into the database. Each woman will have a separate profile.

MN Rural Futures recognition has had a large impact on the winners. Numerous respondents called it an "honor." Some winners noted the connection to other women, "I was delighted to join such an impressive list of women who value rural life." Another stated, "It made me realize the depth of impact my rural family business and farm women research had." Someone else noted "It was very rewarding and made me realize how important women are in agriculture." Many MRF winners were surprised and inspired by the recognition: "It has been a motivator to continue my work and leadership in agriculture." "I got a lot of nice comments - It made people acknowledge "rural" again." "It was a nice surprise and gratifying that someone noticed what I'd been doing. I usually don't take time for recognition."

Past MRF winners were asked for suggestions, comments, questions, etc for MN Rural Futures or on this project. Numerous individuals expressed their support and interest in the project and its results. A MRF winner asked if she could get newsletters or

other communications from MRF and worried she was out of the loop. One respondent suggested trying "another venue besides a dinner...how about a late afternoon reception? Maybe more would attend?" Another woman praised MRF for their "Good idea to be able to invite friends and family to attend the banquet." She suggested that "Mid state would have been a better location" due to the long distance some people have to drive. These comments are very helpful for MRF to continue to meet the needs of rural women. Suggestions are always welcome.

A second survey for women who have not received MRF Futures Awards, but who have exhibited leadership in rural and agricultural life, will be conducted in the near future. Some women who were suggested were:

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Kris Duncanson

Judy Hanson, St Peter oakview@mnica.net

Karen Richter, Montgomery 507-364-5395 rhogheaven@yahoo.com

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Ruth Meirick, Dodge Center area

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De Etta Bilek, deebilek@wcta.net

Bonnie Hintzman, bonnie.hintzman@mn.usda.gov

Seventeen of the 19 women gave permission to MRF to make their name available in the database.

The survey is still posted and updated survey results are on Zoomerang. Ann Treacy, from Minnesota Rural Partners can access the results. Kris Juliar from Minnesota Rural Futures is the ongoing project manager for the survey.